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Poor performers or just plain poor?: Assumptions in the neo-liberal account of school failure

Martin Thrupp

School of Education
The University of Waikato

Abstract

This article argues that schools in decline in educational markets may not be as ineffective as neo-liberals assume. Rather, recent New Zealand research suggests that the fortunes of schools in the marketplace largely reflect the characteristics of their student intakes. Schools in decline typically have poor intakes. Such schools may be less attractive to parents than middle class schools. Schools with poor intakes also have to cope with often overwhelming learning and pastoral needs which constrain their ability to offer demanding academic programmes. Allowing such schools to fail and close therefore appears to be a case of punishing the victim. State intervention is required.

Introduction

Reports of unpopular schools in decline in the educational marketplace have become common in New Zealand and elsewhere in recent years.ⁱ In early 1995, the question of what would happen to New Zealand schools in this predicament became more urgent as the New Zealand Government started to signal possible policy responses. One option being considered by the Minister of Education, Dr. Lockwood Smith, was to simply shut the schools down and bus their students elsewhere. He argued:

If you are left with a school that no one wants to go to—close it and provide ways of getting the kids to a school that is better.ⁱⁱ

Another option being considered was to put the declining schools under the management of more successful ones. As Smith put it:

A lot of people have been saying why the hell don't I go and give the school that is not doing well to the school that is doing well and let that school manage it? That is technically possible.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ For the New Zealand situation, see the research findings of Ainsworth (1993) and Lauder et al. (1994) and the review by Gordon (1995). Magazine articles by Corbett (1992, 1994a, 1994b), Brett, (1994) and Hubbard (1995) are also of interest. Walford (1994) and Pearson (1993) provide useful discussions of the effects of market policies on schools in the UK and USA respectively.

ⁱⁱ Cited in Hubbard (1995, p. 23).



Whether these are good policy responses or not depends very much on where responsibility for the demise of schools in the marketplace is seen to lie. Implicit in such “solutions” to the problem of schools with severely declining rolls is the view that the schools themselves are somehow to blame for their predicament: the students would be bussed to “better schools” that are “doing well”.

This view accords with a neo-liberal perspective on school markets in which the popularity of schools is directly attributable to their performance. From this perspective, teachers and principals of unpopular schools are held accountable for the spiral of decline because they have not responded to their situation sufficiently to boost the reputation of the schools and hence the size of their student intakes. The eventual failure of some schools can therefore be seen simply as the price to be paid for a quality education system. Roger Douglas (1993) provides a good example of the argument in *Unfinished Business*:

With choice, performance would matter. Good schools would prosper and expand: badly performing schools would shrink and die if they didn't change. Poor educational practices would be weeded out and good practices exposed. (p. 94)

Yet, with the prospect of school closures in sight, is it really fair to lay blame for the plight of declining schools on their teachers and principals? In this paper, I want to argue that in most cases it is not, and suggest an alternative account of school failure which looks to the social class characteristics of student intakes to explain the fortunes of schools in the marketplace.^{iv} The starting point of my argument is the observation that schools in decline in New Zealand are invariably dominated by students from poor families. This observation points to two assumptions in the neo-liberal case which this paper will examine.

The first assumption is that, other things being equal, schools with poor intakes are as attractive to parents as middle class schools. We shall see that this premise is problematic because, as studies in other countries have found (Maudus, 1990; Willms & Echols, 1992) the social mix of schools is likely to be a factor considered by many New Zealand parents when they choose schools for their children (Ainsworth et al, 1993; Fowler, 1993; Lauder et al. 1994; Waslander & Thrupp, 1995).

The second assumption is that schools serving poor intakes are able to offer an academic programme as demanding as that offered in middle class schools. I shall argue that this is also a questionable claim. A number of studies from New Zealand and overseas have shown that students from similar social class backgrounds do not achieve as well at low socio-economic (SES) schools as they do at middle class schools (Harker, 1994; Lauder & Hughes, 1990; McPherson & Willms, 1987; Nicholson & Gallienne, 1995). Supporting these findings, my recent research in Wellington schools (Thrupp, 1996) indicates that school staff at low SES schools have many more problems to address than those at middle class schools. As some of the material reported in this paper will indicate, teachers and principals in low SES schools may not be so much ineffective as overwhelmed.

If it is the case that schools in decline are disadvantaged in the marketplace more by virtue of their intake characteristics than ineffective teaching and management per se, then policy measures of the kind raised by neo-liberals will be quite inappropriate. I want to argue instead that comprehensive measures are needed to support schools in decline and the students they serve. Two types of interventions will be suggested in the conclusion to this paper.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cited in Clifton (1995, p. 2).

^{iv} Social class and socio-economic status (SES) are used interchangeably in this paper to indicate differences in family wealth, education levels, occupations and cultural capital.

The characteristics of schools in decline

It is clear that the effects of choice policies are not random. The evidence suggests that New Zealand schools with declining rolls are usually dominated by students from low socio-economic families. For instance, in our recent study of 11 secondary schools comprising a school market in Wellington (Lauder et al, 1994; Waslander & Thrupp, 1995), we found that, whereas the highest socio-economic schools had long waiting lists, the schools with low socio-economic intakes had generally experienced a marked decline in enrolments after the removal of zoning through the loss of their more affluent students. In a similar vein, Ainsworth (1993) survey of Christchurch schools found that 31 of the 32 schools that had declining rolls over 1989–93 had low socio-economic intakes.

Robinson et al. (1994) present evidence that at first seems to contradict this trend. Amongst their sample of 18 Auckland schools they found two middle class schools with declining rolls and two low socio-economic, schools which were gaining students. Yet, this finding does not in itself refute the claim that schools in decline invariably have lower socio-economic intakes. To begin with, although the ethnic composition of schools is described, the socio-economic mix does not appear to have been systematically measured. Furthermore, the proximity and characteristics of schools in the local market are unclear. This raises the possibility, for instance, that the low SES schools may have been gaining students from schools serving even poorer intakes.^v Robinson et al.'s findings also have to be seen in the light of compelling evidence of widespread flight from Auckland schools with poor, non-Pākehā intakes (Corbett, 1994b).^{vi}

The evidence that it is schools serving poor intakes that usually decline in the marketplace highlights the two assumptions in the neo-liberal case for the market introduced above. These will be discussed in turn.

Assumption one: Other things being equal, schools with poor intakes are as attractive to parents as middle class schools.

The fact that schools with declining rolls are generally not middle class suggests that the social class characteristics of school intakes may be a factor which strongly influences parental choice of schools in New Zealand. Our analysis of almost 9,000 school enrolments in Wellington (Waslander & Thrupp, 1995) found that students from better off families usually bypassed low SES schools to attend those with middle class intakes. Although we were not able to investigate why this was the case,^{vii} enrolment in a school with a high SES intake has often been seen as a class strategy used by middle class families to gain social mobility for their children (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982; Walford, 1994). Indeed as Jencks (1972) observed, “many people define a good school not as one with fancy facilities or highly paid teachers but as one with the ‘right’ kinds of students”, a view in which “the quality of a school depends on its exclusiveness” (p. 29).

Supporting this view, a Christchurch study of parental choice of schools (Fowler, 1993) reported that many parents expressed concerns about sending their children to low SES schools specifically because of their intake characteristics. Parents complained about the schools being in a “low socio-economic

^v See especially Appendix A, p. 84–86. Gordon (1995) notes evidence of low SES schools taking students from even lower SES schools in Christchurch.

^{vi} Nevertheless, the scenario painted by Robinson and her colleagues is not entirely inconceivable. For instance, the author is aware of a middle class secondary school in the North Island plagued with rash of teenage suicides which has consequently lost students to a poorer school with a new and dynamic principal. This kind of situation, however, is clearly the exception rather than the rule.

^{vii} Our study was designed primarily to examine shifts in the size and composition of school intakes. The Smithfield Project will report shortly on the nature of parental choice of schools for a different New Zealand cohort.

area” and having undesirable young people, “racial groups” and a “rough element” (p. 108). Fowler concluded:

This report does not suggest that declining rolls were always linked to changes in a schools socio-economic mix. However, the significance of parental comments which reflected on the background of students attending a school should not be overlooked either. (p. 109)

Comments about racial groups raises the possibility that parents also avoid low SES schools for racist reasons. While there is some evidence to support this argument,^{viii} concerns about low socio-economic schools are not limited to Pākehā families. Our Wellington study (Waslander & Thrupp, 1995) suggested that middle class Māori and Pacific Island families were as likely to bypass local low SES schools dominated by Māori and Pacific Island families as Pākehā families.^{ix} A concern with social mobility rather than racism seems to be the best way to explain, for instance, why the principal of “Kauri College” found that the largely low SES Pacific Islands intake of that school was putting a number of parents of prospective Pacific Islands students off the school:

There have certainly been a number of Pacific Island families who have said they are going to [higher SES] “Totara College” and some of them have sat in this office this year and said, ‘well there are too many’. Samoans here so they are going to send their Samoan children there. (ibid., p. 14)

If the social class characteristics of student intakes are of central concern to parents, schools with declining rolls may not be able to respond to market forces in the way envisaged by neo-liberals. For instance, “Kauri College” was working hard to improve its market share through a range of highly publicised measures that suggested a concern with effectiveness (such as employing management consultants) but to no avail (ibid., p. 15). As another principal in the study put it, marketing efforts may not have much effect on the reputations of low SES schools:

The evidence from a place like [a low SES school], they spent literally thousands of dollars on promoting it, their magazine and prospectus and so on would be too good for Eton. They were on the radio last year. It has not made one wit of difference. The kids are still going off to schools with better reputations. People just don't believe you, it's a waste of time. (ibid., pp. 20–21)

Taken on balance the research does suggest that schools with low SES intakes may be heavily disadvantaged in educational markets in terms of attracting enough students to remain viable. It could be claimed, nevertheless, that such schools are avoided by parents not because of class or ethnic concerns per se but because of their poor performance. Certainly, Fowlers (1993) study has shown that many New Zealand parents do couch their choice of schools in the language of “standards”. Yet what if the performance of a school is itself related to the social class composition of its intake? This possibility leads us to the second assumption with which this paper is concerned.

^{viii} Corbett (1994b) sees the decline of some Auckland schools very much in terms of white flight. In our Wellington study (Waslander & Thrupp, 1995) we also found some evidence of white flight—see for instance the case study of Totara College pp. 16–17.

^{ix} Many of the middle class Māori families in our study were sending their children away to Māori boarding schools. It is interesting to consider the implications of these kinds of trends for Kura Kaupapa Māori (KKM). Will the kaupapa of KKM be sufficient to attract middle class students even where a kura is dominated by low SES students? Or will KKM themselves eventually become segregated along socio-economic lines as other schools are?

Assumption two: Schools serving low socio-economic intakes are able to offer an academic programme as demanding as that offered in middle class schools.

The neo-liberal account of school failure assumes that all schools are able to offer quality academic programmes more or less regardless of the characteristics of their intakes. This is in line with the findings of a number of school effectiveness studies over the last two decades (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1988; Rutter et al., 1979; Smith & Tomlinson, 1989; see Reynolds & Cuttance, 1992 for an overview). However, critics of this literature (Angus, 1993, Hogan, 1992, Thrupp, 1995) have pointed to the narrow methodological and theoretical approaches typically employed and the conservative agenda followed:

School effectiveness researchers tend to ignore [the] rich and diverse body of [sociological research developed since the 70s] in favour of a narrow quest to identify school practices that are correlated with narrowly measured student achievement indicators. Their response to 70s pessimism [about the ability of schools to compensate for an unequal society] was simply to deny it, assume that schools do make a difference to student outcomes and search for indicators of this difference. (Angus, 1993, p. 335)

A central problem with the school effectiveness literature is that it has attempted to show that “schools can make a difference” by arguing that school policies and practices are independently the cause of higher achievement found in some schools (after individual student characteristics have been taken into account). However, the causal evidence to support this claim is less clear than most studies acknowledge (Thrupp, 1995). An alternative claim by some researchers (Harker, 1994; Lauder & Hughes, 1990; McPherson & Willms 1987; Nicholson & Gallienne, 1995) is that the group or “contextual” effects of intake composition may also be responsible for differences in achievement. Their studies suggest that students will achieve better academic results if they attend middle class schools than if they attend low socio-economic schools. If their arguments are correct, the social mix of school intakes will be a more important determinant of school performance than neo-liberals allow.

My recent research in Wellington schools (Thrupp, 1996) can speak to this issue because it has been looking for evidence of possible causal mechanisms underlying this school mix effect. The methodology of the study has been described elsewhere (Thrupp, 1994) and need not be revisited in detail here.^x Of central importance, however, is that the research involved the detailed study of four secondary schools with different and similar intakes, one predominantly poor and dominated by Māori and Pacific Island Polynesian students (Tui College), the other three mostly middle class and Pākehā (Victoria, Wakefield, and Plimmer Colleges).^{xi} Differences observed among the schools can therefore be used to suggest processes which occur irrespective of intake characteristics and those which seem to be related to School mix.

Early analyses of the Wellington data support the idea that there are different contextual constraints and possibilities faced by schools serving higher and lower SES intakes. Low SES schools do seem to face much greater problems in presenting quality academic programmes than middle class schools. Although there were considerable reference group, instructional and organisational differences

^x Essentially, I spent the 1994 school year following a cohort of 13 “matched” students through their third form year at four secondary schools with different socio-economic and organisational characteristics. My fieldwork in the schools involved comparing the reference group, instructional and organisational processes to which the matched students were exposed at nested levels within the schools (small groups, classes, departments, the school as a whole).

^{xi} . True to the trend suggested earlier, the latter were all in much stronger market positions than the poor school which had experienced some decline.

between and within all the schools,^{xii} the most substantial of these were between the middle class schools and the poorest, Tui College. Moreover, there was much anecdotal evidence that these differences were related to the intake differences between the schools. The students who attended Tui College presented the staff with problems on a scale virtually unimaginable in the middle class schools.

As it is not possible here to consider the full range of reference group, instructional and organisational differences found between the schools, I shall concentrate on case studies of Tui Colleges school-level curriculum and pastoral processes. Tui Colleges “special needs” role will be discussed first to show how the enormous demands generated by a preponderance of students with low prior achievement may lead low SES schools to focus their instructional efforts towards such students at the expense of “average” students. The subsequent account of Tui Colleges “social welfare” role uses interview material to usefully remind us that in low SES schools an instructional focus of any kind may be frequently overshadowed by more pressing guidance and discipline concerns. Although these two case studies can discuss only a small proportion of the empirical data I collected across the schools, it is hoped that they will nevertheless provide a sense of the scale of the problems faced by the staff and administration of Tui College.

The special needs role

Most students at Tui College arrived at the school with low levels of prior achievement. The Head of the English Department said:

The large bulk of our intake are students who haven’t really been achieving. Seventy percent of our third form intake are two years or more behind their chronological reading ages.

Tui College had consequently developed a plethora of school-wide programmes, committees and action groups to cater for such students with low levels of prior achievement. They included very large special needs and transition departments, a special care unit, and a literacy committee. They also included a programme of subject integration at 3rd and 4th form level intended to increase students time with a single teacher along the lines of a primary school as a means of monitoring student progress more effectively. In terms of curriculum development these measures seemed to take up much of the energy of staff that in the middle class schools would have been directed into the core academic curriculum by way of subject departments.

Tui College was justifiably proud of the strength of its programmes. It claimed that its “least able students were very well served”.^{xiii} However, the staff appeared to be so caught up with dealing with the mass of students with low prior achievement that they were unable to give much thought to the needs of “average”, relatively less problematic students. Indeed, there seemed to be a considerable degree of staff ambivalence, if not hostility, to addressing the needs of this small group when the great majority of students had more pressing needs. This was made clear when a programme for “able students” was proposed at Tui College.

At first glance, such a programme might reasonably be seen as a step towards redressing the schools preoccupation with the needs of students with very low levels of prior achievement. Yet the written rationale for the able students” programme, worth quoting in full, suggests that there were other, more pressing, issues at stake:

^{xii} In this respect, I agree with Ramsay, Sneddon, Grenfell, and Ford (1983) that the characteristics of schools are often idiosyncratic.

^{xiii} From Tui College's development plan.

It is vital that we attract and retain, able, well motivated students. This means students of above average natural ability who come from supportive homes where education is valued and they are encouraged to do well. We are talking about students who bring with them the essential skills and attitudes that provide positive role models for other students. These students create the positive learning energies in classrooms and provide the backbone for many activities beyond.

A significant number of such students from our natural zone are receiving their education out of the area. We talk about white flight but that is simplistic. There are parents across every ethnic group who take very seriously the questions:

How can I ensure the best educational opportunities for my child? What can I do to ensure my child's future is as secure as possible?

Choosing a secondary school is one of the most significant decisions parents make for their children.

It is significant that the formal rationale for an "able students" programme should be couched not so much in terms of the school doing its best by students who were "above average" [read "unexceptional" for the middle class schools] but in terms of recruitment of those kinds of students for the perceived advantages they would bring to other less able and motivated students and Tui College as a whole. It suggests, either, that the principal (who wrote this rationale) saw Tui College as being most concerned with improving the educational prospects of students with low prior achievement, or, that this angle was being used as a way to sell the programme to staff who were primarily concerned about students with low prior achievement.

Staff were invited to make written responses to the suggested "able students" programme. These indicated that the principal had good reason to be cautious in promoting the interests of ordinary "able" students. There was general support from the staff for the programme as a means to "help bring up the standard for everyone" but this was tempered by concern about taking resources from programmes for the more numerous "less able". For instance:

Shouldn't compromise programme for less able students. It's an add on, not an alternative.

Needs to be marketed to the community. If the emphasis is placed here, some of the community may be put off sending their students here—elitism.

Extra tuition at the expense of other curriculum?

"Disabled" programme should not be compromised in order to put this in place.

In the event the school did start to set up an able students programme. However, one of those charged with implementing the programme expressed reservations that the innovation would not take off because the staff were already too busy and, in general, not really very interested:

I suppose your middle and your bright kids are expected to get on with it ... It's an issue of staff time, they haven't got the time or energy to give up X number of hours to help a relatively small number of kids, they have basically got their hands full. I think there is a cynicism amongst the staff that these aren't able kids; they are just a good average, so why are we kidding ourselves? But your top kids are the best you've got aren't they?

In contrast, at the middle class schools programmes to extend students with high levels of prior attainment were largely uncontroversial. In these schools, the curriculum efforts of staff were heavily geared towards the examination success of "average" and "above average" students. The generally high achieving nature of their intakes mean that the "special needs role" at these schools was more

peripheral. Initiatives catering for students with low levels of prior achievement had a much lower profile than at Tui College.

The social welfare role

When the administration and staff of Tui College were not dealing with serious learning problems, they were often dealing with serious pastoral problems. Indeed, guidance and disciplinary issues, often with a care and protection dimension, seemed to be the most pressing problem facing Tui College administrators:

Interviewer: What are the issues that create problems for you in running the school?

Principal: Let's just take today, never mind the long term view. Look in terms of the suspensions we have had to do this year. I've just written a report to the board listing the 18 suspensions we have done [over the first part of] this year....

Assistant Principal: We have problem after problem after problem of the sort that are way beyond our skills to have any impact on. I'm talking about kids from dysfunctional families who by the age of 13 or 14 are involved in truancy and crime ... So that's the big one for me, manifested in lots of ways, the kids who truant, the kids who go off their heads in the classroom, the kids who are depressed.

Deputy Principal: The dysfunctional family, the by-products of that go without saying, the behaviours we are dealing with at Tui College are behavioural problems of kids who are entirely out of control at home. We have got an increasing number of those, I can't quantify it but we have more hardline kids we just can't control....

There appear to be about 30–40 students at any one time, mostly 3rd and 4th formers, who were of major concern to the school's guidance network:

Assistant Principal: There are probably 10 kids who are so far out of control we can do nothing to fix it and their families can't either. Then there are a second raft of kids who are [also] serious ... there is about 2030 of them.

Guidance Counsellor: Those 40 students are where most of the resources go. It is almost "care and protection" issues.

Some different examples volunteered by the Tui College administration suggested the scale of the demands on Tui College presented by these students and, in the absence of adequate help from outside agencies, the impotence they felt in the face of those demands:

Deputy Principal: Let's take Student A, who one month pinches some stuff in a pretty organised fashion, is suspended, comes back and in the space of two weeks manages to systematically rob two other staff members, their wallets, keys and so on. A practiced criminal. Or Student B, a girl who is totally out of control at home, sleeps rough in the city, heavily into crime, mums been arrested, she's got a drug and alcohol problem, a father who is trying to claim custody but there's some sexual abuse history in the background, that sort of situation. That student, suspended for violence, back in school, picked up smoking hash. What do we do with that kid? There have been meetings with Social Welfare, Justice are involved but finally there is no place for that kid at school....

Principal: [This] boy, suspended once for graffitising the toilets, came back, we worked through that, the guardian was really uptight, totally "anti" the boy having to make amends for his misbehaviour. Then we had a violent incident with the boy, the kid was so uptight we knew something had to be seriously wrong. So we started to explore

that, I won't go into the details but essentially the home situation was totally dysfunctional, this kid feels utterly neglected and used. We have a policy of no-violence so the suspension was actioned. The intention was to create some pressure so the family would acknowledge the difficulties and seek third party help to pull the kid in. The response of the family was to say, "bugger you, if you are going to respond like that, we'll take the kid out of school". So in that situation I wrote, said, "that's a bad choice, we are committed to working this through; it's important that you are too. I'll be notifying Social Welfare, the matter won't go away". So you see it's very complicated, it's the grandfather, two separate uncle/aunt combos, the mother hadn't been on the scene for a number of years and nobody wants to know including Social Welfare. So where do you put those kinds of issues? At that level they are a huge drain.

Not surprisingly, dealing with these cases was very time-consuming. The principal estimated that suspensions took some 30 hours to process on average including meetings with the student, parents, outside agencies and the Board of Trustees. The Assistant Principal commented:

Following through student problems takes up a lot of time. Each case takes so long because you often have to visit in person, many families aren't on the phone, you set up a meeting and people don't turn up....

Like the senior administration, the guidance counsellor was also under enormous pressure. He was thought by several staff to be completely swamped and admitted to having a current caseload of 180, about 30% of the school population.

The kind of social welfare work being done by the administration and guidance counsellor of Tui College meant that they had relatively little time to devote to curriculum matters compared to the middle class schools. It also meant that the administration had less time to deal with relatively less important disciplinary and pastoral issues. These were supposed to be addressed by a devolved pastoral system of several "Houses", each with its own head teacher. Officially, there had been positive reasons for developing this system,^{xiv} but one of its unacknowledged purposes was to prevent students ending up in the principal's office too quickly.

Interviewer: Do you think that one of the reasons it [the House system] was set up was to prevent students reaching the administration too quickly?

House Head: I don't think any one has ever said that was one of the reasons but it is one of the reasons. The House system makes things cyclical between the House Head and the form tutor. That circle might go around a bit then it goes up to the administration. So there has been a lot of work before you get to the point where you have to boot kids out.

Interviewer: So has there been any change to that?

House Head: Not really. We are still booting kids out. But our intake has changed also so it is hard to know.

Yet, given the number of students that presented guidance and discipline problems, the senior administration would have been completely overwhelmed if Tui College had not had a fairly comprehensive pastoral system in place. This point had not escaped some staff:

^{xiv} By having vertical form classes, students stayed with the same form teacher throughout their school careers so there was seen to be a better chance for form teachers to get to know and respond more quickly to the pastoral needs of students. The form tutor would also become a familiar contact person for parents particularly as siblings were usually put in the same vertical form class. The system was also seen to give senior students leadership opportunities and provide younger students with positive role models.

Teacher: At [a nearby middle class school] problem children were sent up the system very quickly 'cos there were so few of them. Whereas here if they did that they would be swamped. I think the administration realises that and realises "hey, we really need to have the staff on side with us".

Certainly, the administration staff saw their role as being only at the end of the line:

Assistant Principal: I believe we should only be the end point of the system, when all else is failed. So we are like the last stop.

Deputy Principal: We are placing increasing demands of a custodial nature on our staff. They resent it, but they realise they have to do it.

The only misdemeanours that therefore warranted immediate suspension and "last stop" administration action at Tui College were starting a fight or carrying or using drugs or alcohol. As a consequence, the House Heads further down the school found themselves dealing with issues such as serious truancy and verbal abuse of teachers. Some resented this:

House Head: The House Heads feel they are doing too much. They [the senior administration] pick up very little these days. Maybe a major fight where parents come in. We are asked to deal with all these [other] issues ... what we are getting is that if it's one of [the students in] your House, you deal with it, which is hard. [The senior administration] are not very receptive, ... it's like, don't hassle me, I've got enough hassles.

It was at the level of the Form tutors—5 or 6 in each House—that most individual student problems were expected to be addressed. However, few form tutors were able to deal effectively with the range of activities they were expected to pick up as they had a considerable administrative load:

House Head: In terms of the [House] groups being self actualising well, it depends on the teachers in your group but the constraint is the time spent on other issues ... in form tutor time there are too many administrative tasks that need to be done, they don't have time for pastoral care.

As a result of the enormous demands placed on the guidance and discipline system at Tui College at every level, there was little support for classroom teachers. They were generally expected to deal with their own discipline problems. However with little backup, many teachers chose to avoid addressing disciplinary issues, undoubtably at the expense of the learning environment of their classrooms.^{xv}

Teacher: At Tui College, [students] don't go somewhere else. It's your problem, you deal with it. So it depends how much confrontation you are prepared to buy into.

By comparison, pastoral and disciplinary problems on the scale experienced at Tui College were simply unheard of at the three middle class schools in the study. For instance, while Tui College suspended more than 50 students, 9.5% of its (3rd–6th form) roll over 1994, none of the middle class schools suspended more than 3.2% of their students, even though many of the suspensions in these schools were for less serious matters than at Tui College. The senior administrations, deans and guidance staff at the middle class schools were all under much less pressure and typically intervened earlier to provide more effective support to classroom teachers.

The need for better interventions

In advance of more detailed evidence about the nature of school choice and a more comprehensive discussion of the likely effects of school mix on school processes, it has only been possible here to

^{xv} Thrupp (1996) will examine this issue in more depth.

sketch the outline of the case against the neo-liberal account of school failure. Nevertheless, if the scenario presented here is correct, the fairness of the educational marketplace for low SES schools needs to be challenged. For if, given a choice, most parents prefer middle class schools over low SES schools, this hardly seems a problem for which the staff of the latter can be held to account. Nor, if teachers have a much more difficult job to deliver a demanding academic programme at low SES schools, will they be able to deliver similar academic programmes as middle class schools in any case.

In the light of these considerations, shutting down low SES schools in decline or allowing them to wither and die appears to be a case of punishing the victim. The notion of improving the schools by bringing in the managers of more exclusive schools will also be misguided because it does not adequately recognise the constraints under which low SES schools operate in the marketplace. What is needed instead are fairer and more constructive interventions. In closing, I want to suggest two: intervening in school markets and substantially increasing the resources available to low SES schools.

The aim of the first approach would be to create more balanced school intakes so as to both share the problems of poverty more evenly around schools and move middle class social and economic resources into (presently) low SES schools. It is important to note that the idea of balancing school intakes is not entirely incompatible with the notion of choice. Some kind of “controlled choice” intervention should be possible that allows parents a choice of schools (including school types—private, single sex, Kura Kaupapa Māori and so on) but not at the expense of extreme SES segregation. A controlled choice scheme is operating in Boston where, as Walford (1994) notes, it has been at least partly successful:

The Boston controlled choice experiment is widely cited as having met with success. In practice, it is still very limited in its overall effect, but for most children it probably represents a move towards greater equity by using a method which is more acceptable to most groups. (p. 159)

Walford also warns however that middle class resistance to the Boston scheme highlights “the considerable difficulties inherent in trying to bring about equity” (ibid). For this reason the second approach of providing substantial extra resources to low SES schools may also be a useful policy measure which would not threaten class interests so directly.^{xvi} Although it is commonly argued by conservatives that giving more resources to low SES schools is not the answer, Kozol (1991) rightly points out that many of those who make this claim send their own children to highly resourced schools. It is unlikely that considerably lower student-teacher ratios and more guidance and management staff could not make some difference in low SES school settings such as Tui College.^{xvii} Providing more resources to low socio-economic schools may not be enough to attract middle class students but it would clearly go some way towards reducing the pressures these schools presently face by virtue of their current intakes.

Conclusion

If New Zealand schools which have declined in the marketplace are soon forced to close, chances are they will have had poor intakes rather than performed poorly. This likelihood suggests the need for

^{xvi} Although my study points to staffing as being a key issue, current levels of equity funding also appear to be completely inadequate relative to the scale of need. John Grant, an Auckland principal, recently called this funding “real Oliver Twist stuff”. “They put a bit in the bottom of my bowl and I’ve got to be grateful for that, but, fair go, it is not a meal” (cited in Hubbard, 1995 p. 22).

^{xvii} Especially if efforts were made to ensure that teachers were able to move between low socio-economic settings and middle class schools. Recently the Ministry of Education has begun to provide limited relocation funding to teachers taking up positions in Decile 1 schools. However in the current climate of uncertainty about the fate of teachers in schools with declining rolls, a staffing incentive and guarantee of further employment may also be necessary to promote movement.

further empirical research into school markets to challenge the neo-liberal view of the marketplace as a universal panacea. Even more important however is to develop a sense of widespread moral urgency around the concerns of low SES schools and the students they serve.

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